

## Recollections of Clarrie Handreck

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I commenced my position in the Museum of Victoria's Invertebrate Zoology Department in December 1988. Though I was yet to meet Clarrie Handreck, I soon discovered that his name frequently cropped up in conversation around the department, often in an air of reverence. Unbeknown to me at the time, Clarrie was a member of the Marine Research Group of Victoria (MRG), a group of volunteers who came into the Museum one Saturday per month, to work in the Invertebrate Zoology collections, then located in the basement (more affectionately known as the 'dungeons') of the old National Museum of Victoria in Russell Street. These monthly 'museum workdays' were initiated by the late Dr Brian Smith in 1967 as a way of maintaining the MRG team during the winter months, when it was too cold for field work. All came together once a month to share their knowledge and expertise and to undertake vital curatorial and collection-based projects. Museum workdays are still a prominent fixture on the FNCV-MRG calendar.

My first encounter with Clarrie (and many of the MRG team) was not until the following year when I was asked to fill in as supervisor on one of the workdays. It was here that I discovered first hand the finely tuned machine that was (and still is) the MRG, and at its helm was Clarrie Handreck. In reality there was probably little need for my presence. Everyone had their job and knew exactly what to do. This group included as broad a cross-section of the community as one could hope to see, with one thing in common — an insatiable interest and curiosity about our marine environment. Some were generalists, keen to learn as much as they could, whilst others were highly-regarded experts, equally as keen to impart as much as they could. The lab hummed along with a frenzy of activity, much the same as it had some one hundred and fifty times beforehand, since 1967. At the end of the day, as if by magic, all the speci-

mens, lab equipment and paraphernalia were quietly and efficiently put away and the lab was left pretty much as it was found that morning. Throughout the day, Clarrie was on hand to offer guidance, encouragement and direction to those who needed it; thoughtful and insightful opinion to those who sought it; and when required, simply roll up his sleeves and muck in. Over the following 12–18 months, I saw Clarrie only on the odd occasion, usually just popping in to drop something off for one of the curators, or perhaps visit the library to check out a reference. In 1991, Clarrie retired from his position as a primary school principal and commenced regular volunteer work in earnest. It was during this period that I had the privilege to really get to know and work with him.

It is difficult to put an accurate figure on Clarrie's contribution to the Museum. He commenced at a time prior to any formal volunteer programme or the keeping of attendance records. As far as I can ascertain, his association with the Museum most likely would have started around the same time he joined the MRG, in 1971. According to our 'official' records, Clarrie clocked up an estimated 12 500 hours of volunteer work. (The actual figure may be a lot higher!) He is in a select group of only four Museum volunteers to have passed the 10 000 hour milestone, and is currently still the longest serving volunteer on record. The official figures tell only part of the story. It was Clarrie's infectious enthusiasm and incredible work ethic that elevated him beyond the realms of a mere mortal volunteer. Here was a man whose work ethic could put many a full time member of staff to shame. I often had to remind myself that Clarrie actually was a *retired* man, offering his services gratis! Though 'retired', Clarrie still maintained a strict regime. If he said he would be in by 9:00 am, then you could set your watch by him. Lunch and coffee breaks were kept to a minimum and there was no leaving early at

the end of the day. Clarrie would work right up to the absolute last possible minute, allowing just enough time to clean up and leave in time to catch his train home. He most likely would have arrived on the station platform just as the train was pulling in! On the rare occasion when Clarrie was running late or unable to come in, he would always phone to apologise and promise to make up for lost time. (And he did!) Regardless of the task he was given, Clarrie gave 110%.

Clarrie was a committed conservationist with a broad knowledge and deep respect for the natural world. He was passionate about the collection and the data associated with it. Collection data is an important resource for environmental managers. For this reason, he saw the data written on specimen labels as a huge untapped resource waiting to be set free, and the only way to set it free was to 'get it onto the database'. He often said that the 'specimen data was not much good to anyone if it wasn't on the database'. In 1992, Clarrie began a 17-year obsession with databasing specimen data. Lot by lot, he began the monumental task of chipping away at the backlog of collection registrations. Clarrie and Denys Phillips worked together, and initially focused on entering data from the old hand-written register books. Not content with this alone, they also topped up alcohol, re-labelled, re-housed, re-named and re-organised specimens if required. Clarrie appreciated that many hands make light work and so encouraged other volunteers to use the database. Since many of our volunteers had little or no experience with databases, Clarrie wrote a beginner's user manual, which he updated from time to time. In order to standardise database entries he compiled a comprehensive 48 page index detailing frequently used localities, donors, collectors and information on field expeditions. The index also included an alphabetical listing of Victorian coastal localities, complete with latitudes and longitudes, and a section covering projects of the MRG and its forerunner, the Marine Study Group.

In 1998 the Museum was on the move. Construction of the new Carlton Gardens complex was well underway, but not due for completion until 2000. Meanwhile, the National Gallery of Victoria wanted to press ahead with

its own refurbishment program at its St Kilda Road complex and was in need of a temporary exhibition venue. The solution? Bring forward Museum of Victoria's exit from the Russell Street campus! With the move to Carlton Gardens still another two years away, the plan involved relocating the Museum's staff and collections to various temporary premises around Melbourne within a tight time frame. To ensure the relocation went off without a hitch, huge resources were channelled into the aptly named Accelerated Relocation Project. Since the collections were going to be moved, the Museum quickly adopted the position that every effort would be made to ensure that they were in a fit state to be moved. The Museum also seized on the opportunity not only to prepare collections for moving, but to actually improve on their standards of curation. It was Clarrie's meticulous attention to detail and intimate knowledge of the collection that made him the natural choice to be employed as part of a team to prepare the Natural Sciences spirit collections for relocation. Along with his fellow Collection Preparation Officers, the entire spirit collection was assessed, re-curated, re-labelled, re-sorted and packed into steel unit trays. The effort put into this preparation ultimately paved the way for their successful relocation to our temporary premises at Abbotsford and the subsequent relocation to the new Melbourne Museum at Carlton Gardens. The relocation of Natural Sciences collection was achieved on time and on budget. The excellent condition of the collection today stands as testament to the huge efforts of Clarrie and the team.

During the 'Abbotsford' period (December 1998–August 2000), Clarrie was one of few volunteers who continued their regular activities, yet despite all the disruptions he somehow still managed to register 4610 specimen lots.

In late 2000, the Invertebrate collection was finally settled into its new permanent home at Melbourne Museum. The following years would prove to be Clarrie's most productive. Once again he threw himself into the seemingly endless task of collection registration. One of his first projects was the registration of at least one representative of every species of marine chiton and gastropod held in the spirit collection. Unfortunately, in December 2001

Clarrie was diagnosed with an aggressive prostate cancer and given an initial prognosis of around two years. Not being one to quietly fade away, Clarrie upped the ante. Instead of giving his usual 110%, he was now operating at 120%!

With the completion of his first project behind him, Clarrie embarked on his most ambitious project yet. Phase two would see the *complete* registration, curation and re-organisation of all marine chitons and gastropods in the spirit collection. With help from the relevant experts, Clarrie began by first compiling a detailed index of all species represented in the collection, complete with current nomenclature, synonymies, bibliographic references and shelf locations. The end result was a two volume index which became the 'Bible' for anyone entering data, or putting specimens away in the collection. Clarrie and fellow volunteer Catherine Guli powered their way through registering the spirit collection. In 2004, with the introduction of the Museum's new database system EMu, Clarrie decided that it would be more efficient if Catherine was to concentrate on data entry, whilst he concentrated on handling and labelling the specimens. What was perhaps not evident to many people was the amount of time Clarrie put into compiling lists, checking nomenclature, synonymies and spelling errors at home, in preparation for his next registration session. Every hour spent at the museum was at least matched in time spent at home. Even more astonishing was that much of this project was undertaken in between rounds of intensive radiotherapy or chemotherapy treatments. In typical Clarrie fashion, he was able to forecast the dates his 'good days' would fall on, and organise his diary accordingly. Together with Catherine, Clarrie was able to see the project through to completion.

Apart from his museum volunteer commitments, Clarrie also continued to provide leadership for the MRG, and importantly provided a crucial link between the MRG and the Museum's curatorial and collection management staff. By 2009 the cancer was taking its toll,

and in April that year when he was physically no longer able to carry on, Clarrie reluctantly ceased regular volunteer work. Still keen to keep a hand on progress, an extremely frail Clarrie continued to call into the museum from time to time, if only briefly to pass on his latest list of updates or amendments to Catherine.

Always modest about his achievements, Clarrie often understated his contributions to the Museum and, much to the frustration of his colleagues, shied away from many attempts to formally recognise him. Clarrie always insisted that any achievements were the result of a team effort. He frequently described his role as 'just doing the hack work, so that the experts could be freed up for more important things'. In reality, he could not have been further from the truth. In his last five years, Clarrie and a band of volunteers and staff registered approximately 18 900 lots of specimens. In total, he was directly or indirectly involved in the registration of approximately 29 300 lots. There would be very few specimens that have not been handled personally by Clarrie at some time. In recognition of his contributions, the holothuroid *Aposolidium handrecki* O'Loughlin & O'Hara, 1992 and the hermit crab *Paquixus handrecki* Gunn & Morgan, 1992 are named in his honour. In 2001, he was honoured with a High Commendation in the category of Lifetime Achievement at the 2001 Victorian Coastal Awards for Excellence.

I knew Clarrie only in the context of his museum work. It was not until I attended his funeral that I began to appreciate that he was a man with many interests and talents, contributing as freely and productively to these as he did to his museum work. Clarrie was universally admired and respected, and is sadly missed by all.

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